



# Ahimsā

Newsletter of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

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## Taking the Precepts

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### PREFACE

Going for refuge to the Triple Gem — the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha — is the door of entrance to the Buddha's teaching. To enter the teaching, we have to pass through this door, but once we have made the initial commitment by taking refuge, it is necessary to go further and to put the teaching into actual practice. For the Buddha's teaching is not a system of salvation by faith. It is essentially a path leading to *nibbāna*, the end of suffering (*dukkha*). At the outset, we need a certain degree of faith (*saddhā*) as the incentive for entering the path, but progress towards the goal depends primarily upon our own energy and intelligence in following the path through each of its successive stages. The teaching takes the attainment of deliverance away from every external resort and places it into our own hands. We have to realize the goal for ourselves, within ourselves, by working upon ourselves with the guidance of the Buddha's instructions.

The path to liberation that the Buddha points to is the threefold training in moral discipline (*sīla*), concentration (*saṃādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). These three divisions of the path rise up each in dependence upon its predecessor — concentration upon moral discipline and wisdom upon concentration. The foundation for the entire path, it can be seen, is the training in moral discipline. Because this first section of the path plays such a pivotal role, it is vitally important for the serious practitioner to obtain a clear under-

standing of its essential meaning and the way it is to be practiced. To help in the development of such an understanding, we here present an explanation of the training in *sīla* or moral discipline, giving special attention to its most basic form as the observance of the five precepts (*pañcasīla*). The subject will be dealt with under the following headings: (i) the essential meaning of *sīla*; (ii) the five precepts individually explained; (iii) the eight precepts; (iv) the benefits of *sīla*; (v) the undertaking of *sīla*; (vi) the breach of *sīla*; and (vii) the similes for *sīla*.

### I. THE ESSENTIAL MEANING OF SĪLA

The Pāli word for moral discipline, *sīla*, has three levels of meaning: (1) inner virtue, that is, endowment with such qualities as kindness, contentment, simplicity, truthfulness, patience, etc.; (2) virtuous actions of body and speech which express those inner virtues outwardly; and (3) rules of conduct governing actions of body and speech designed

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## Activities

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- Conducts informal seminars on Buddhism.
- Prepares and distributes free educational material.

## Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following programs:

- Instructions in meditation.
- *Dhamma* study groups.
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

There are no fees for any of the activities or programs offered by the organization. Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend. However, study groups and meditation instructions are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment. There is no fee for one-on-one discussions. ■

## Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship is an educational organization whose purpose is to preserve and promote the original teachings of the Buddha in the West.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship actively encourages an ever-deepening process of commitment among Westerners to live a Buddhist way of life in accordance with the original Teachings of the Buddha.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides free educational material to those who want to learn about Buddhism and about how to put the Teachings of the Buddha into practice.

The goals of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship are:

1. To provide systematic instruction in the *Dhamma*, based primarily on Pāli sources.
2. To promote practice of the *Dhamma* in daily life.
3. To provide guidance on matters relating to the *Dhamma*, its study, and its practice.
4. To encourage the study of the Pāli language and literature.
5. To maintain close contact with individuals and groups interested in promoting and supporting the foregoing goals. ■

## Dhamma Study Groups

The are currently no active study groups.  
However, educational material is still being produced and distributed free of charge.

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to bring them into accord with the ethical ideals. These three levels are closely intertwined and not always distinguishable in individual cases. But if we isolate them, *sīla as inner virtue* can be called the aim of the training in moral discipline, *sīla as purified actions of body and speech* the manifestation of that aim, and *sīla as rules of conduct* the systematic means of actualizing the aim. Thus *sīla as inner virtue* is established by bringing our bodily and verbal actions into accord with the ethical ideals, and this is done by following the rules of conduct intended to give these ideals concrete form.

The Buddhist texts explain that *sīla* has the characteristic of harmonizing our actions of body and speech. *Sīla* harmonizes our actions by bringing them into accord with our own true interests, with the well-being of others, and with universal laws. Actions contrary to *sīla* lead to a state of self-division marked by guilt, anxiety, and remorse. But the observance of the principles of *sīla* heals this division, bringing our inner faculties together into a balanced and centered state of unity. *Sīla* also brings us into harmony with others. While actions undertaken in disregard of ethical principles lead to relations marred by competitiveness, exploitation, and aggression, actions intended to embody such principles promote harmony between men — peace, cooperation, and mutual respect. The harmony achieved by maintaining *sīla* does not stop at the social level, but leads our actions into harmony with a higher law — the law of *kamma*, of action and its fruit, which reigns invisibly behind the entire world of sentient existence.

The need to internalize ethical virtue as the foundation for the path translates itself into a set of precepts established as guidelines to good conduct. The most basic set of precepts found in the Buddha's teaching is the *pañcasīla*, the five precepts, consisting of the following five training rules:

1. To abstain from taking life;
2. To abstain from taking what is not given;
3. To abstain from sexual misconduct;

4. To abstain from false speech; and
5. To abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness.

These five precepts are the minimal ethical code binding on the Buddhist laity. They are administered regularly by the monks to the lay practitioners at almost every service and ceremony, following immediately upon the giving of the three refuges. They are also undertaken afresh each day by earnest lay Buddhists as part of their daily recitation.

The precepts function as the core of the training in moral discipline. They are intended to produce, through methodical practice, that inner purity of will and motivation which comes to expression as virtuous bodily and verbal conduct. Hence, the equivalent term for precept, *sikkhāpada*, which means literally "factor of training," that is, a factor of the training in moral discipline. However, the formulation of ethical virtue in terms of rules of conduct meets with an objection reflecting an attitude that is becoming increasingly widespread. This objection, raised by the ethical generalist, calls into question the need to cast ethics into the form of specific rules. It is enough, it is said, simply to have good intentions and to let ourselves be guided by our intuition as to what is right and wrong. They declare that submitting to rules of conduct is at best superfluous, but worse tends to lead to a straightjacket conception of morality, to a constrictive and legalistic system of ethics.

The Buddhist reply is that while moral virtue admittedly cannot be equated flatly with any set of rules, or with outward conduct conforming to rules, the rules are still of value for aiding the development of inner virtue. Only the very exceptional few can alter the stuff of their lives by a mere act of will. The overwhelming majority of men have to proceed more slowly, with the help of a set of stepping stones to help them gradually cross the rough currents of greed, hatred, and delusion. If the process of self-transformation which is the heart of the Buddhist path begins with moral discipline, then the

concrete manifestation of this discipline is in the lines of conduct represented by the five precepts, which call for our adherence as expedient means to self-transformation. The precepts are not commandments imposed from without, but principles of training each one willingly takes upon oneself and endeavors to follow with awareness and understanding. The formulas for the precepts do not read: "Thou shalt not do this and that." Instead, they read: "I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking life," etc. The emphasis here, as throughout the entire Buddhist path, is on self-responsibility.

The precepts create virtuous dispositions by a process involving the substitution of opposites. The actions prohibited by the precepts — killing, stealing, adultery, etc. — are all motivated by unwholesome mental factors called in Buddhist terminology the "defilements" (*kilesa*). By engaging in these actions knowingly and willingly, we reinforce the grip of the defilements upon the mind to the point where they become our dominant traits. But when we take up the training by observing the precepts, we then put a brake upon the current of unwholesome mental factors. There then takes place a process of "factor substitution" whereby the defilements are replaced by wholesome states which become increasingly more deeply ingrained as we go on with the training.

In this process of self-transformation, the precepts draw their efficacy from another psychological principle, the law of development through repetition. Even though at first a practice arouses some resistance from within, if it is repeated over and over with understanding and determination, the qualities it calls into play pass imperceptibly into the makeup of the mind. We generally begin in the grip of negative attitudes, hemmed in by unskillful emotions. But if we see that these states lead to suffering and that to be free from suffering we must abandon them, then we will have sufficient motivation to take up the training designed to counter them. This training starts with the outer observance of *sīla*, then proceeds to

internalize self-restraint through meditation and wisdom. At the start, to maintain the precepts may require special effort, but by degrees, the virtuous qualities they embody will gather strength until our actions flow from them as naturally and smoothly as water from a spring.

The five precepts are formulated in accordance with the ethical algorithm of using oneself as the criterion for determining how to act in relation to others. In Pāli the principle is expressed by the phrase *attānam upamāni katvā*, "consider oneself as similar to others and others as similar to oneself." The method of application involves a simple imaginative exchange of oneself and others. In order to decide whether or not to follow a particular line of action, we take ourselves as the standard and consider what would be pleasant and painful for ourselves. Then, we reflect that others are basically similar to ourselves, and so, what is pleasant and painful to us is also pleasant and painful to them; thus, just as we would not want others to cause pain to us, so we should not cause pain to others. As the Buddha explains:

*In this matter, the noble disciple reflects: "Here am I, fond of my life, not wanting to die, fond of pleasure and averse from pain. Suppose someone should deprive me of my life, it would not be a pleasing or delightful thing to me. If I, in my turn, were to deprive of his life one fond of life, not wanting to die, one fond of pleasure and averse to pain, it would not be a pleasing or delightful thing to him. For that state which is not pleasant or delightful to me must be not pleasant or delightful to another: and a state neither dear nor pleasing to me, how could I inflict that upon another?" As a result of such reflection, he himself abstains from taking the life of creatures, he encourages others so to abstain, and he speaks in praise of so abstaining.*

— *Samyuttanikāya* 55, No. 7

The Buddha uses this deductive method to derive the first four precepts. The fifth precept, abstaining from intoxicants, appears to deal only with my relation to myself, with what I put into my own body. However, because the violation of this precept can lead to the violation of all the other precepts and to much further harm for others, its social implications are deeper than is evident at first sight and bring it into range of the same method of derivation.

Buddhist ethics, as formulated in the five precepts, is sometimes charged with being entirely negative. It is criticized on the ground that it is a morality solely of avoidance, lacking any ideals of positive action. Against this criticism several lines of reply can be given. First of all, it has to be pointed out that the five precepts, or even the longer codes of precepts promulgated by the Buddha, do not exhaust the full range of Buddhist ethics. The five precepts are only the most rudimentary code of moral training, but the Buddha also proposes other ethical codes inculcating definite positive virtues. The Maṅgala Sutta, for example, commends reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude, patience, generosity, etc. Other discourses prescribe numerous family, social, and political duties establishing the well-being of society. And behind all these duties lie the four attitudes called the “immeasurables”—loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

But turning to the five precepts themselves, some words have to be said in defense of their negative formulation. Each moral principle included in the precepts contains two aspects — a negative aspect, which is a rule of abstinence, and a positive aspect, which is a virtue to be cultivated. These aspects are called, respectively, *vāritta* (avoidance) and *cāritta* (positive performance). Thus, the first precept is formulated as abstaining from the destruction of life, which in itself is a *vāritta*, a principle of abstinence. But corresponding to this, we also find in the descriptions of the practice of this precept a *cāritta*, a positive quality to be

developed, namely, compassion. Thus, in the *suttas*, we read: “The disciple, abstaining from the taking of life, dwells without stick or sword, conscientious, full of sympathy, desirous of the welfare of all living beings.” So corresponding to the negative side of abstaining from the destruction of life, there is the positive side of developing compassion and sympathy for all beings. Similarly, abstinence from stealing is paired with honesty and contentment, abstinence from sexual misconduct is paired with marital fidelity in the case of lay people and celibacy in the case of monks, abstinence from falsehood is paired with speaking the truth, and abstinence from intoxicants is paired with heedfulness.

Nevertheless, despite this recognition of a duality of aspect, the question still comes up: “if there are two sides to each moral principle, why is the precept worded only as an abstinence?” Why don’t we also undertake training rules to develop positive virtues such as compassion, honesty, and so forth?

The answer to this is twofold. First, in order to develop the positive virtues we have to begin by abstaining from the negative qualities opposed to them. The growth of the positive virtues will only be stunted or deformed as long as the defilements are allowed to reign unchecked. We cannot cultivate compassion while at the same time indulging in killing, or cultivate honesty while stealing and cheating. At the start, we have to abandon the unwholesome through the aspect of avoidance. Only when we have secured a foundation in avoiding the unwholesome can we expect to succeed in cultivating the factors of positive performance. The process of purifying virtue can be compared to growing a flower garden on a plot of uncultivated land. We don’t begin by planting the seeds in expectation of a bountiful yield. We have to start with the duller work of weeding out the garden and preparing the beds. Only after we have uprooted the weeds and nourished the soil can we plant the seeds in the confidence that the flowers will grow healthily.

Another reason why the precepts are

worded in terms of abstinence is that the development of positive virtues cannot be prescribed by rules. Rules of training can govern what we have to avoid and perform in our outer actions but only ideals of aspiration, not rules, can govern what develops within ourselves. Thus, we cannot take up a training rule to always be loving towards others. To impose such a rule is to place ourselves in a double bind since inner attitudes are just simply not so docile that they can be determined by command. Love and compassion are the fruits of the work we do on ourselves inwardly, not of assenting to a precept. What we can do is to undertake a precept to abstain from destroying life and from injuring other beings. Then, we can make a resolution, preferably without much fanfare, to develop loving-kindness, and apply ourselves to the mental training designed to nourish its growth.

One more word should be added concerning the formulation of the precepts. Despite their negative wording, even in that form, the precepts are productive of tremendous positive benefits for others as well as for oneself. The Buddha says that one who abstains from the destruction of life gives immeasurable safety and security to countless living beings. How the simple observance of a single precept leads to such a result is not immediately obvious but calls for some thought. Now, by myself, I can never give immeasurable safety and security to other beings by any program of positive action. Even if I were to go on protest against all the slaughterhouses in the world, or to march against war continuously without stopping, by such action, I could never stop the slaughter of animals or ensure that war would come to an end. But when I adopt for myself the precept to abstain from the destruction of life, then by reason of that precept, I do not intentionally destroy the life of any living being. Thus, any other being can feel safe and secure in my presence; all beings are ensured that they will never meet harm from me. Of course, even then, I can never ensure that other living beings will be absolutely immune from harm and suffering, but this is beyond

anyone's power. All that lies within my power and the sphere of my responsibility are the attitudes and actions that emanate from myself towards others. And as long as these are circumscribed by the training rule to abstain from taking life, no living being need feel threatened in my presence, or fear that harm and suffering will come from me.

The same principle applies to the other precepts. When I undertake the precept to abstain from taking what is not given, no one has reason to fear that I will steal what belongs to him; the belongings of all other beings are safe from me. When I undertake the precept to abstain from sexual misconduct, no one has reason to fear that I will try to transgress against his wife. When I undertake the precept to abstain from falsehood, then anyone who speaks with me can be confident that they will hear the truth; my word can be regarded as trustworthy and reliable even in matters of critical importance. And because I undertake the precept of abstaining from intoxicants, then one can be assured that the crimes and transgressions that result from intoxication will never be committed by myself. In this way, by observing the five precepts, I give immeasurable safety and security to countless beings simply through these five silent but powerful determinations established in the mind.

## II. THE FIVE PRECEPTS

### 1. The First Precept: Abstinence From Taking Life

The first of the five precepts reads in Pāli, *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*; in English, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking life." Here, the word *pāṇa*, meaning that which breathes, denotes any living being that has breath and consciousness. It includes animals and insects as well as human beings, but does not include plants since they have only life but not breath or consciousness. The word "living being" is a conventional term, an expression of common usage, signifying in the strict philosophical

sense the life faculty (*jīvitindriya*). The word *atipāta* means literally striking down, hence killing or destroying. Thus, the precept enjoins abstinence (*veramanī*) from the taking of life. Though the precept's wording prohibits the killing of living beings, in terms of its underlying purpose, it can also be understood to prohibit injuring, maiming, and torturing as well.

The Pāli Buddhist commentaries formally define the act of taking life thus: "The taking of life is the volition of killing expressed through the doors of either body or speech, occasioning action which results in the cutting off of the life faculty in a living being, when there is a living being present and (the perpetrator of the act) perceives it as a living being."

The first important point to note in this definition is that the act of taking life is defined as a volition (*cetanā*). Volition is the mental factor responsible for action (*kamma*); it has the function of arousing the entire mental apparatus for the purpose of accomplishing a particular aim, in this case, the cutting off of the life faculty of a living being. The identification of the transgression with volition implies that the ultimate responsibility for the act of killing lies with the mind, since the volition that brings about the act is a mental factor. The body and speech function merely as doors for that volition, that is, as channels through which the volition of taking life reaches expression. Killing is classified as a bodily deed since it generally occurs via the body, but what really performs the act of killing is the mind using the body as the instrument for actualizing its aim.

A second important point to note is that killing need not occur directly through the body. The volition to take life can also express itself through the door of speech. This means that the command to take life, given to others by way of words, writing, or gesture, is also considered a case of killing. One who issues such a command becomes responsible for the action as soon as it achieves its intention of depriving a being of life.

A complete act of killing constituting a full violation of the precept involves five

factors: (1) a living being; (2) the perception of the living being as such; (3) the thought or volition of killing; (4) the appropriate effort; and (5) the actual death of the being as a result of the action. The second factor ensures that responsibility for killing is incurred only when the perpetrator of the act is aware that the object of his action is a living being. Thus, if we step on an insect we do not see, the precept is not broken because the perception or awareness of a living being is lacking. The third factor ensures that the taking of life is intentional. Without the factor of volition there is no transgression, as when we kill a fly while intending simply to drive it away with our hand. The fourth factor holds that the action must be directed to the taking of life, the fifth that the being dies as a result of this action. If the life faculty is not cut off, a full violation of the precept is not incurred, though in harming or injuring living beings in any way, its essential purpose will be violated.

The taking of life is distinguished into different types by way of its underlying motivation. One criterion for determining the motivation is the defilement principally responsible for the action. Acts of killing can originate from all three unwholesome roots — from greed, hatred, and delusion. As the immediate cause concomitant with the act of killing, hatred together with delusion function as the root, since the force which drives the act is the impulse to destroy the creature's life, a form of hatred. Any of the three unwholesome roots, however, can serve as the impelling cause or decisive support (*upanissaya paccaya*) for the act, operating over some span of time. Though greed and hatred are always mutually exclusive at a single moment, the two can work together at different moments over an extended period to bring about the taking of life. Killing motivated primarily by greed is seen in such cases as killing in order to gain material benefits or high status for oneself, to eliminate threats to one's comfort and security, or to obtain enjoyment as in hunting and fishing for sport. Killing motivated by hatred is evident in cases of vicious murder where the motive is strong aversion, cruelty, or jealousy. And

killing motivated by delusion can be seen in the case of those who perform animal sacrifices in the belief that they are spiritually wholesome or who kill followers of other religions with the view that this is a religious duty.

Acts of taking life are differentiated by way of their degree of moral gravity. Not all cases of killing are equally blameworthy. All are unwholesome, a breach of the precept, but the Buddhist texts make a distinction in the moral weight attached to different kinds of killing. The first distinction given is that between killing beings with moral qualities (*guna*) and killing beings without moral qualities. For all practical purposes the former are human beings, the latter animals, and it is held that to kill a fellow human being is a more serious matter ethically than to kill an animal. Then, within each category, further distinctions are made. In the case of animals, the degree of moral gravity is said to be proportional to the size of the animal, to kill a larger animal being more blameworthy than to kill a smaller one. Other factors relevant to determining moral weight are whether the animal has an owner or is ownerless, whether it is domestic or wild, and whether it has a gentle or a vicious temperament. The moral gravity would be greater in the former three alternatives, less in the latter three. In the killing of human beings, the degree of moral blame depends on the personal qualities of the victim — to kill a person of superior spiritual stature or one's personal benefactors being more blameworthy than to kill a less developed person or one unrelated to oneself. The three cases of killing selected as the most culpable are matricide, parricide, and the murder of an *Arahat*, a fully purified one.

Another factor determinative of moral weight is the motivation of the act. This leads to a distinction between premeditated murder and impulsive killing. The former is murder in cold blood, intended and planned in advance, driven either by strong greed or strong hatred. The latter is killing which is not planned in advance, as when one person kills another in a fit of rage or in self-defense. In general, premeditated murder is

regarded as a graver transgression than impulsive killing, and the motivation of hatred as more blameworthy than the motivation of greed. The presence of cruelty and the obtaining of sadistic pleasure from the act further increase its moral weight.

Other factors determinative of moral gravity are the force of the defilements accompanying the act and the amount of effort involved in its perpetration, but limitations of space prohibit a full discussion of their role.

## 2. The Second Precept: Abstinence From Taking What Is Not Given

The second precept reads: *Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*, “I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what is not given.” The word *adinna*, meaning literally “what is not given,” signifies the belongings of another person over which he exercises ownership legally and blamelessly (*adandāraho anupavajjo*). Thus, no offence is committed if the article taken has no owner, for example, if logs are taken to make a fire or stones are gathered to build a wall. Further, the other person has to have possession of the article taken legally and blamelessly; that is, he has to have the legal right over the article and also has to be blameless in his use of it. This latter phrase apparently becomes applicable in cases where a person gains legal possession of an article but does so in an improper way or uses it for unethical purposes. In such cases, there might be legitimate grounds for depriving him of the item, as when the law requires someone who commits a misdemeanor to pay a fine or deprives a person of some weapon rightfully his which he is using for destructive purposes.

The act of taking what is not given is formally defined thus: “Taking what is not given is the volition with thievish intent arousing the activity of appropriating an article belonging to another legally and blamelessly in one who perceives it as belonging to another.” As in the case of the first precept, the transgression here consists ultimately in a volition. This volition can commit the act of theft by originating action

through body or speech; thus, a transgression is incurred either by taking something directly by oneself or else indirectly, by commanding someone else to appropriate the desired article. The fundamental purpose of the precept is to protect the property of individuals from unjustified confiscation by others. Its ethical effect is to encourage honesty and right livelihood.

According to the commentaries, for a complete breach of the precept to be committed five factors must be present: (1) an article belonging to another legally and blamelessly; (2) the perception of it as belonging to another; (3) the thought or intention of stealing; (4) the activity of taking the article; and (5) the actual appropriation of the article. By reason of the second factor there is no violation in taking another's article if we mistakenly perceive it as our own, as when we might confuse identical-looking coats, umbrellas, etc. The third factor again provides a safeguard against accidental appropriation, while the fifth asserts that to fall into the class of a transgression the action must deprive the owner of his article. It is not necessary that he be aware that his possession is missing, only that it be removed from his sphere of control even if only momentarily.

Taking what is not given can be divided into many different kinds of violation. We might mention some of the most prominent. One is *stealing*, that is, taking what is not given, secretly, without the knowledge of the owner, as in housebreaking, a midnight bank theft, pick-pocketing, etc. Another type is *robbery*, taking what is not given by force, either by snatching someone's belongings away from him or by compelling him to hand them over by means of threats. A third type is *fraud*, laying false claims or telling lies in order to gain someone else's possessions. Still another is *deceit*, using deceptive means to deprive someone of an article or to gain his money as when storekeepers use false weights and measures or when people produce counterfeit bills for use.

The violation of this precept need not amount to a major crime. The precept is subtle and offers many opportunities for its breach,

some of them seemingly slight. For example, transgression will be incurred when employees take goods belonging to their employers, pocketing small items to which they have no right with the thought that the company will not miss them; when using another's telephone to make long-distance calls without his consent, letting him cover the bill; in bringing articles into a country without declaring them to customs in order to avoid paying duty on them; in idling away time on the job for which one is being paid in the expectation that one has been working diligently; in making one's employees work without giving them adequate compensation, etc.

By way of its underlying roots, the act of taking what is not given can proceed either from greed or hatred, both being coupled with delusion. Stealing by reason of greed is the obvious case, but the offence can also be driven by hatred. Hatred functions as the motive for stealing when one person deprives another of an article not so much because he wants it for himself as because he resents the other's possession of it and wants to make him suffer through its loss.

The degree of blame attached to acts of stealing is held to be determined by two principal factors, the value of the article taken and the moral qualities of the owner. In stealing a very valuable article, the degree of blame is obviously greater than in stealing an article of little worth. But where the value of the article is the same, the blameworthiness of the action still varies relative to the individual against whom the offence is committed. As determined by this factor, stealing from a person of high virtuous qualities or a personal benefactor is a more serious transgression than stealing from a person of lesser qualities or from an unrelated person. This factor, in fact, can be even more important than the cash value of the object. Thus, if someone steals an alms-bowl from a Buddhist monk, who needs the bowl to collect his food, the moral weight of the act is heavier than that involved in cheating a racketeer out of several thousand dollars, owing to the character of the person affected by the deed.

The motivation behind the action and the force of the defilements are also determinative of the degree of moral gravity, hatred being considered more culpable than greed.

### 3. The Third Precept: Abstinence From Misconduct In Regard To Sense Pleasures

The third precept reads: *Kāmesu micchācārā veramanī sikkhapadam samādiyāmi*, “I undertake the training rule to abstain from misconduct in regard to sense pleasures.” The word *kāma* has the general meaning of sense pleasure or sensory desire, but the commentaries explain it in terms of sexual relations (*methuna-samācāra*), an interpretation supported by the *suttas*. *Micchācāra* means wrong modes of conduct. Thus, the precept enjoins abstinence from improper or illicit sexual relations.

Misconduct in regard to sense pleasures is formally defined as “the volition with sexual intent occurring through the bodily door, causing transgression with an illicit partner”. The primary question this definition elicits is: who is to qualify as an illicit partner? For men, the texts list twenty types of women who are illicit partners. These can be grouped into three categories: (1) a woman who is under the protection of elders or other authorities charged with her care, for instance, a girl being cared for by parents, by an older brother or sister, by other relatives, or by the family as a whole; (2) a woman who is prohibited by convention, that is, close relatives forbidden under family tradition, nuns and other women vowed to observe celibacy as a spiritual discipline, and those forbidden as partners under the law of the land; and (3) a woman who is married or engaged to another man, even one bound to another man only by a temporary agreement. In the case of women, for those who are married any man other than a husband is an illicit partner. For all women, a man forbidden by tradition or under religious rules is prohibited as a partner. For both men and women, any violent, forced, or coercive union, whether by physical compulsion or psychological pressure, can be regarded as a transgression of the precept

even when the partner is not otherwise illicit. But a man or woman who is widowed or divorced can freely remarry according to choice.

The texts mention four factors which must be present for a breach of the precept to be incurred: (1) an illicit partner, as defined above; (2) the thought or volition of engaging in sexual activity with that person; (3) the act of engaging in sexual activity; and (4) the acceptance of the sexual activity. This last factor is added for the purpose of excluding from violation those who are unwillingly forced into improper sexual relations.

The degree of moral gravity involved in the offence is determined by the force of the lust motivating the action and the qualities of the person against whom the transgression is committed. If the transgression involves someone of high spiritual qualities, the lust is strong, and force is used, the blame is heavier than when the partner has less developed qualities, the lust is weak, and no force is used. The most serious violations are incest and the rape of an *Arahat*. The underlying root is always greed accompanied by delusion.

### 4. The Fourth Precept: Abstinence From False Speech

The fourth precept reads: *Musāvādā veramanī sikkhapadam samādiyāmi*, “I undertake the training rule to abstain from false speech.” False speech is defined as “the wrong volition with intent to deceive, occurring through the door of either body or speech, arousing the bodily or verbal effort of deceiving another.” The transgression must be understood as intentional. The precept is not violated merely by speaking what is false, but by speaking what is false with the intention of representing that as true; thus, it is equivalent to lying or deceptive speech. The volition is said to arouse bodily or verbal action. The use of speech to deceive is obvious, but the body too can be used as an instrument of communication — as in writing, hand signals, and gestures — and thus can be used

to deceive others.

Four factors enter into the offence of false speech: (1) an untrue state of affairs; (2) the intention of deceiving another; (3) the effort to express that, either verbally or bodily; and (4) the conveying of a false impression to another. Since intention is required, if one speaks falsely without aiming at deceiving another, as when one speaks what is false believing it to be true, there is no breach of the precept. Actual deception, however, is not needed for the precept to be broken. It is enough if the false impression is communicated to another. Even though he does not believe the false statement, if one expresses what is false to him and he understands what is being said, the transgression of speaking falsehood has been committed.

The motivation for false speech can be any of the three unwholesome roots. These yield three principal kinds of falsehood: (1) false speech motivated by greed, intended to increase one's gains or promote one's status or that of those dear to oneself; (2) false speech motivated by hatred, intended to destroy the welfare of others or to bring them harm and suffering; and (3) false speech of a less serious kind, motivated principally by delusion in association with less noxious degrees of greed or hatred, intended neither to bring special benefits to oneself nor to harm others. Some examples would be lying for the sake of a joke, exaggerating an account to make it more interesting, speaking flattery to gratify others, etc.

The principal determinants of the gravity of the transgression are the recipient of the lie, the object of the lie and the motivation of the lie. The recipient is the person to whom the lie is told. The moral weight of the act is proportional to the character of this person, the greatest blame attaching to falsehoods spoken to one's benefactors or to spiritually developed persons. The moral weight again varies according to the object of the lie, the person the lie affects, being proportional to his spiritual qualities and his relation to oneself in the same way as with the recipient. And thirdly, the gravity of the lie is

contingent on its motivation, the most serious cases being those with malicious intent designed to destroy the welfare of others. The worst cases of false speech are lying in a way that defames the Buddha or an *Arahat*, and making false claims to have reached a superior spiritual attainment in order to increase one's own gains and status. In the case of a Bhikkhu, this latter offence can lead to expulsion from the Saṅgha.

## 5. The Fifth Precept: Abstinence From Intoxicating Drinks and Drugs

The fifth precept reads: *Surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmī*, “I undertake the training rule to abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness.” The word *meraya* means fermented liquors, *sura* liquors which have been distilled to increase their strength and flavor. The word *majja*, meaning an intoxicant, can be related to the rest of the passage either as qualified by *surāmeraya* or as additional to them. In the former case, the whole phrase means fermented and distilled liquors which are intoxicants, in the latter, it means fermented and distilled liquors and other intoxicants. If this second reading is adopted, the precept would explicitly include intoxicating drugs used non-medicinally, such as the opiates, marijuana, and psychedelics. But even on the first reading, the precept implicitly proscribes these drugs by way of its guiding purpose, which is to prevent heedlessness caused by the taking of intoxicating substances.

The taking of intoxicants is defined as the volition leading to the bodily act of ingesting distilled or fermented intoxicants. It can be committed only by one's own person (not by command to others) and only occurs through the bodily door. For the precept to be violated four factors are required: (1) the intoxicant; (2) the intention of taking it; (3) the activity of ingesting it; and (4) the actual ingestion of the intoxicant. The motivating factor of the violation is greed coupled with delusion. No gradations of moral weight are given. In taking medicines containing alcohol or

intoxicating drugs for medical reasons, no breach of the precept is committed. There is also no violation in taking food containing a negligible amount of alcohol added as a flavoring.

This fifth precept differs from the preceding four in that the others directly involve a man's relation to his fellow beings, while this precept ostensibly deals solely with a person's relation to himself — to his own body and mind. Thus, whereas the first four precepts clearly belong to the moral sphere, a question may arise whether this precept is really ethical in character or merely hygienic. The answer is that it is ethical, for the reason that what a person does to his own body and mind can have a decisive effect on his relations to his fellow men. Taking intoxicants can influence the ways in which a man interacts with others, leading to the violation of all five precepts. Under the influence of intoxicants, a man who might otherwise be restrained can lose self-control, become heedless, and engage in killing, stealing, adultery, and lying. Abstinence from intoxicants is prescribed on the grounds that it is essential to the self-protection of the individual and for establishing the well-being of family and society. The precept thus prevents the misfortunes that result from the use of intoxicants: loss of wealth, quarrels and crimes, bodily disease, loss of reputation, shameless conduct, negligence, and madness.

This precept, it must be stressed, does not prohibit merely intoxication but the very use of intoxicating substances at any time and in any quantity. Though occasional indulgences may not be immediately harmful in isolation, the seductive and addictive properties of intoxicants are well known. The strongest safeguard against the lure is to avoid them altogether.

### III. THE EIGHT PRECEPTS

Beyond the five precepts, Buddhism offers a higher code of moral discipline for the laity consisting of eight precepts (*atthasila*). This code of eight precepts is not entirely different

in content from the fivefold code, but includes the five precepts with one significant revision. The revision comes in the third precept, where abstaining from sexual misconduct is changed to abstaining from all forms of sexual activity. The third precept of the eightfold set thus reads: *Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī sikkhapadam samādiyāmi*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from all sexual activity." To these basic five three further precepts are added:

- (6) *Vikālabhojanā veramaṇī sikkhapadam samādiyāmi*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from eating beyond the time limit," that is, from mid-day to the following dawn.
- (7) *Nacca-gīta-vādita-visūkadassana-mālagandha-vilepana-dharanā-mandana-vibhūsanaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhapadam samādiyāmi*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from dancing, singing, instrumental music, unsuitable shows, and from wearing garlands, using scents (perfume, cologne, etc.), and beautifying the body with cosmetics."
- (8) *Uccāsayana mahāsayanā veramaṇī sikkhapadam samādiyāmi*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from high and luxurious beds and seats."

There are two ways in which these precepts are observed — permanently and temporarily. Permanent observance, far the less common of the two, is undertaken generally by older people who, having completed their family duties, wish to deepen their spiritual development by devoting the later years of their life to intensified spiritual practice. Even then, it is not very widespread. Temporary observance is usually undertaken by lay people either on Uposatha days or on occasions of a meditation retreat. Uposatha days are the new moon and full moon days of the lunar month, which are set aside for special religious observances, a custom absorbed into Buddhism from ancient Indian custom going back even into the pre-Buddhist period of Indian history. On these days, lay people in Buddhist countries often take the eight

precepts, especially when they go to spend the Uposatha at a temple or monastery. On these occasions, the undertaking of the eight precepts lasts for a day and a night. Then, secondly, on occasions of retreat, lay people take the eight precepts for the duration of their retreat, which might last anywhere from several days to several months.

The formulation of two distinct ethical codes follows from the two basic purposes of the Buddhist moral discipline. One is the fundamental ethical purpose of putting a brake on immoral actions — actions which are harmful either directly or indirectly to others. This purpose falls into the province of the fivefold code of precepts, which deals with the restraint of actions that cause pain and suffering to others. In enjoining abstinence from these unwholesome actions, the five precepts also protect the individual from their undesirable repercussions on himself — some immediately visible in this present life, some coming to manifestation only in future lives, when the *kamma* they generate bears its fruit. The other purpose of the Buddhist training in moral discipline is not so much ethical as spiritual. It is to provide a system of self-discipline which can act as a basis for achieving higher states of realization through the practice of meditation. In serving this purpose, the code functions as a kind of asceticism, a way of conduct involving self-denial and renunciation as essential to the ascent to higher levels of consciousness. This ascent, culminating in *nibbāna* or final liberation from suffering, hinges upon the attenuation and ultimate eradication of craving (*tanhā*), which, with its multiple branches of desire, is the primary force that holds us in bondage. To reduce and overcome craving, it is necessary to regulate not only the deleterious types of moral transgressions but also modes of conduct which are not harmful to others but still give vent to the craving that holds us in subjection.

The Buddhist code of discipline expounded in the eight precepts represents the transition from the first level of moral discipline to the second, that is, from *sīla* as a purely moral undertaking to *sīla* as a way of

ascetic self-training aimed at progress along the path to liberation. The five precepts also fulfil this function to some extent, but they do so only in a limited way, not as fully as the eight precepts. With the eight precepts, the ethical code takes a pronounced turn towards the control of desires which are not socially harmful and immoral. This extension of the training focuses upon desires centering around the physical body and its concerns. The change of the third precept to abstinence from incelibacy curbs the sexual urge, regarded in itself not as a moral evil but as a powerful expression of craving that has to be held in check to advance to the higher levels of meditation. The three new precepts regulate concern with food, entertainment, self-beautification, and physical comfort. Their observance nurtures the growth of qualities essential to the deeper spiritual life — contentment, fewness of wishes, modesty, austerity, and renunciation. As these qualities mature, the defilements are weakened, aiding the effort to reach attainment in serenity and insight.

#### IV. THE BENEFITS OF SĪLA

The benefits *sīla* brings to the one who undertakes it can be divided into three classes:

1. The benefits pertaining to the present life;
2. The benefits pertaining to future lives; and
3. The benefit of the ultimate good.

These we will discuss in turn.

##### 1. Benefits Pertaining to the Present Life

At the most elementary level, the observance of the five precepts protects one from getting into trouble with the law, ensuring immunity from temporal punishment at least with regard to those actions covered by the precepts. Killing, stealing, adultery, bearing false testimony, and irresponsible behavior caused by drunkenness being offences punishable by law, one who undertakes the

five precepts avoids the penalties consequent upon these actions by abstaining from the actions which entail them.

Further temporal benefits accrue through the observance of the precepts. Following the precepts helps to establish a good reputation among the wise and virtuous. At a more inward level, it leads to a clear conscience. Repeated violations of the basic principles of ethics, even if they escape detection, still tend to create a disturbed conscience — the pain of guilt, uneasiness, and remorse. But maintaining the precepts results in freedom from remorse, an ease of conscience that can evolve into the “bliss of blamelessness” (*anavajjasukha*) when we review our actions and realize them to be wholesome and good. This clarity of conscience fosters another benefit — the ability to die peacefully, without fear or confusion. At the time of death, the various actions we have regularly performed in the course of life rise to the surface of the mind, casting up their images like pictures upon a screen. If unwholesome actions were prevalent during one’s life, their weight will predominate and cause fear at the approach of death, leading to a confused and painful end. But if wholesome actions were prevalent in the course of life, the opposite will take place: when death comes, we will be able to die calmly and peacefully.

## 2. Benefits Pertaining to Future Lives

According to the Buddha’s teaching, the mode of rebirth we take in our next existence is determined by our *kamma* — the volitional actions we have performed in this present existence. The general principle governing the working of the rebirth process is that unwholesome *kamma* leads to an unfavorable rebirth, wholesome *kamma* to a favorable rebirth. More specifically, if the *kamma* built up by breaking the five precepts becomes the determining cause of the mode of rebirth, it will conduce to rebirth in one of the four planes of misery — the hells, the realm of tormented spirits, the animal world, or the world of the *asuras*. If, as a result of some wholesome *kamma*, a person who regularly

breaks the five precepts should take rebirth as a human being, then, when his unwholesome *kamma* matures, it will produce pain and suffering in his human state. The forms this suffering takes correspond to the transgressions. Killing leads to a premature death, stealing to loss of wealth, sexual misconduct to enmity, false speech to being deceived and slandered by others, and the use of intoxicants to loss of intelligence.

The observance of the five precepts, on the other hand, brings about the accumulation of wholesome *kamma* tending to rebirth in the planes of happiness, that is, in the human or celestial worlds. This *kamma* again, coming to maturity in the course of the life, produces favorable results consonant in nature with the precepts. Thus, abstaining from the taking of life leads to longevity, abstaining from stealing to prosperity, abstaining from sexual misconduct to popularity, abstaining from false speech to a good reputation, and abstaining from intoxicants to mindfulness and wisdom.

## 3. The Benefits of the Ultimate Good

The ultimate good is the attainment of *nibbāna*, deliverance from the round of rebirths, which can be achieved either in the present life or in some future life depending on the maturity of our spiritual faculties. *Nibbāna* is attained by practicing the path leading to deliverance, the Noble Eightfold Path in its three stages of moral discipline, concentration, and wisdom. The most fundamental of these three stages is moral discipline or *sīla*, which begins with the observance of the five precepts. The undertaking of the five precepts can thus be understood to be the first actual step taken along the path to deliverance and the indispensable foundation for the higher attainments in concentration and wisdom.

*Sīla* functions as the foundation for the path in two ways. First, the observance of *sīla* promotes a clear conscience, essential to the development of concentration. If we often act contrary to the precepts, our actions tend to give rise to remorse, which will swell up to

the surface of the mind when we sit in meditation, creating restlessness and feelings of guilt. But if we act in harmony with the precepts, our minds will be imbued with a bliss and clarity of conscience which allows concentration to develop easily. The observance of the precepts conduces to concentration in a second way: it rescues us from the danger of being caught in a crossfire of incompatible motives disruptive of the meditative frame of mind. The practice of meditation aimed at serenity and insight requires the stilling of the defilements. But when we deliberately act in violation of the precepts, our actions spring from the unwholesome roots of greed, hatred, and delusion. Thus, in committing such actions, we are arousing the defilements while at the same time, when sitting in meditation, we are striving to overcome them. The result is inner conflict, disharmony, a split right through the center of our being, obstructing the unification of the mind needed for meditative attainment.

At the outset, we cannot expect to eliminate the subtle forms of the defilements all at once. These can only be tackled later, in the deeper stages of meditation. In the beginning, we have to start by stopping the defilements in their coarser modes of occurrence, and this is achieved by restraining them from reaching expression through the channels of body and speech. Such restraint is the essence of *sīla*. We therefore take up the precepts as a form of spiritual training, as a way of locking in the defilements and preventing them from outward eruptions. After they have been shut in and their effusions stopped, we can then work on eliminating their roots through the development of concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*).

## V. THE UNDERTAKING OF SĪLA

The Buddhist tradition recognizes three distinct ways of observing the precepts. One is called immediate abstinence (*sampattavirati*), which means abstaining from unwholesome actions naturally through an

ingrained sense of conscience resulting either from an innately keen ethical disposition or from education and training. The second is called abstinence through undertaking (*samādana-virati*), which means abstaining as a result of having undertaken rules of training with a determination to follow those rules as guidelines to right action. The third way is called abstinence through eradication (*saṃuccheda-virati*), which means abstaining from the transgressions covered by the precepts as a result of having cut off the defilements out of which transgressions arise.

For purposes of self-training, Buddhism emphasizes the importance of the second type of abstinence. Immediate abstinence is seen as praiseworthy in itself but not sufficient as a basis for training, since it presupposes the prior existence of a strong conscience, which is not a reality in the overwhelming majority of people. In order to develop the mental strength to resist the upsurge of the defilements, it is essential to undertake the precepts by a deliberate act of will and to form the determination to observe them diligently.

There are two ways of formally undertaking the five precepts, the initial and the recurrent, corresponding to the two ways of going for refuge. The initial undertaking takes place immediately after the initial going for refuge. When the aspirant receives the three refuges from a Bhikkhu in a formal ceremony, this will then be followed by the administering of the five precepts, the monk reciting each of the precepts in turn and the lay disciple repeating them after him. If there is no monk available to administer the refuges and precepts, the aspirant can take them upon himself by a strong and fixed mental resolution, preferably doing so before an image of the Buddha. The presence of a monk is not necessary but is generally desired to give a sense of the continuity of the lineage.

The undertaking of the precepts is not a one-shot affair to be gone through once and then dropped off into the storage bank of memories. Rather, like the going for refuge the precepts should be undertaken repeatedly, preferably on a daily basis. This is the recurrent

undertaking of the precepts. Just as the disciple repeats the three refuges each day to strengthen his commitment to the Dhamma, so he should recite the five precepts immediately after the refuges in order to express his determination to embody the Dhamma in his conduct. However, the practice of *sīla* is not to be confused with the mere recitation of a verbal formula. The recitation of the formula helps reinforce one's will to carry out the training, but beyond all verbal recitations, the precepts have to be put into practice in day-to-day life, especially on the occasions when they become relevant. Undertaking the precepts is like buying a ticket for a train: the purchase of the ticket permits us to board the train but does not take us anywhere by itself. Similarly, formally accepting the precepts enables us to embark upon the training, but after the acceptance, we have to translate the precepts into action.

Once we have formed the initial determination to cultivate *sīla*, there are certain mental factors which then help to protect our observance of the precepts. One of these is mindfulness (*sati*). Mindfulness is awareness, constant attention, and keen observation. Mindfulness embraces all aspects of our being — our bodily activities, our feelings, our states of mind, our objects of thought. With sharpened mindfulness, we can be aware exactly what we are doing, what feelings and states of mind are impelling us towards particular courses of action, what thoughts form our motivations. Then, by means of this mindfulness, we can avoid the unwholesome and develop the wholesome.

Another factor which helps us maintain the precepts is understanding (*paññā*). The training in moral discipline should not be taken up as a blind dogmatic submission to external rules, but as a fully conscious process guided by intelligence. The factors of understanding give us that guiding intelligence. To observe the precepts properly, we have to understand for ourselves which kinds of actions are wholesome and which are unwholesome. We also have to understand the reason why — why they are wholesome and unwholesome, why the one should be

pursued and the other abandoned. The deepening of understanding enables us to see the roots of our actions, that is, the mental factors from which they spring and the consequences to which they lead, their long-term effects upon ourselves and others. Understanding expands our vision not only into consequences, but also into alternatives, into the different courses of action offered by any objective situation. Thence, it gives us knowledge of the various alternatives open to us and the wisdom to choose some in preference to others.

A third factor that helps in maintaining the precepts is energy (*viriya*). The training in right conduct is at base a way of training the mind, since it is the mind that directs our actions. But the mind cannot be trained without effort, without the application of energy to steer it into wholesome channels. Energy works together with mindfulness and understanding to bring about the gradual purification of *sīla*. Through mindfulness, we gain awareness of our states of mind; through understanding, we can ascertain the tendencies of these states, their qualities, roots, and consequences; then, through energy, we strive to abandon the unwholesome and to cultivate the wholesome.

The fourth factor conducive to the training in *sīla* is patience (*khanti*). Patience enables us to endure the offensive actions of others without becoming angry or seeking retaliation. Patience also enables us to endure disagreeable circumstances without dissatisfaction and dejection. It curbs our desires and aversions, restraining us from transgressions through greedy pursuits or violent reprisals.

Abstinence through eradication (*samucccheda-virati*), the highest form of observing the precepts, comes about automatically with the attainment of the state of a Noble One (*Ariya*), one who has reached one of the four stages of sainthood, that is, one who has achieved direct realization of the Dhamma. When the disciple reaches the stage of stream-entry (*sotāpatti*), the first of the noble stages, he becomes bound to reach full liberation in a maximum of seven more lives. He is incapable of reverting from the course of forward

progress towards enlightenment. Simultaneously with his attainment of stream-entry, the disciple acquires four inalienable qualities, called the four factors of stream-entry (*sotāpattiyaṅga*). The first three are unshakable faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. The fourth is completely purified *sīla*. The noble disciple has cut off the defilements which motivate transgressions of the precepts. Thus, he can never deliberately violate the five precepts. His observance of the precepts has become “untorn, unrent, unblotched, unmotiled, liberating, praised by the wise, not clung to, conducive to concentration.”

## VI. THE BREACH OF SĪLA

To undertake the precepts is to make a determination to live in harmony with them, not to ensure that one will never break them. Despite our determination, it sometimes happens that, due to carelessness or the force of our conditioning by the defilements, we act contrary to the precepts. The question thus comes up as to what to do in such cases.

One thing we should not do if we break a precept is to let ourselves become ridden by guilt and self-contempt. Until we reach the planes of liberation, it is to be expected that the defilements can crop up from time to time and motivate unwholesome actions. Feelings of guilt and self-condemnation do nothing to help the matter but only make things worse by piling on an overlay of self-aversion. A sense of shame and moral scrupulousness are central to maintaining the precepts, but they should not be allowed to become entangled in the coils of guilt.

When a breach of the precepts takes place, there are several methods of making amends. One method used by monks to gain exoneration in regard to infringements on the monastic rules is confession. For certain classes of monastic offences, a monk can gain clearance simply by confessing his transgression to another monk. Perhaps, with suitable modifications, the same procedure could be applied by the laity, at least with

regard to more serious violations. Thus, if there are a number of lay people who are earnestly intent on following the path, and one falls into a breach of a precept, he can confess his lapse to a Dhamma friend, or, if one is not available, he can confess it privately before an image of the Buddha. It must be stressed, however, that confession does not aim at gaining absolution. No one is offended by the ethical lapse, nor is there anyone to grant forgiveness. Also, confession does not nullify the *kamma* acquired by the transgression. The *kamma* has been generated by the deed and will produce its due effect if it gains the opportunity. The basic purpose of confession is to clear the mind of the remorse bearing upon it as a consequence of the breach. Confession especially helps to prevent the concealment of the lapse, a subtle maneuver of the ego used to bolster its pride in its own imagined perfection.

Another method of making amends is by retaking the five precepts, reciting each precept in turn either in the presence of a monk or before an image of the Buddha. This new undertaking of the precepts can be reinforced by a third measure, namely, making a strong determination not to fall into the same transgression again in the future. Having applied these three methods, one can then perform more virtuous actions as a way of building up good *kamma* to counteract the unwholesome *kamma* acquired through the breach of the precept. *Kamma* tends to produce its due result and, if this tendency is sufficiently strong, there is nothing we can do to blot it out. However, *kamma* does not come to fruition always as a matter of strict necessity. Karmic tendencies push and tug with one another in complex patterns of relationship. Some tend to reinforce the results of others, some to weaken the results, some to obstruct the results. If we build up wholesome *kamma* through virtuous actions, this pure *kamma* can inhibit the unwholesome *kamma* and prevent it from reaching fruition. There is no guarantee that it will do so, since *kamma* is a living process, not a mechanical one. But the tendencies in the process can be understood, and since one such tendency is

for the wholesome to counteract the unwholesome and hinder their undesired results, a helpful power in overcoming the effects of breaking the precepts is the performance of virtuous actions.

## VII. THE SIMILES FOR SĪLA

The texts illustrate the qualities of *sīla* with numerous similes, but as with the three refuges we must again limit ourselves to only a few. *Sīla* is compared to a stream of clear water, because it can wash off the stains of wrong actions which can never be removed by the waters of all other rivers. *Sīla* is like sandalwood, because it can remove the fever

of the defilements just as sandalwood (according to ancient Indian belief) can be used to allay bodily fever. Again, *sīla* is like an ornament made of precious jewels because it adorns the person who wears it. It is like a perfume because it gives off a pleasant scent, the “scent of virtue,” which, unlike ordinary perfume, travels even against the wind. It is like moonbeams because it cools off the heat of passion as the moon cools off the heat of the day. And *sīla* is like a staircase because it leads upwards by degrees — to higher states of future existence in the fortunate realms, to the higher planes of concentration and wisdom, to the supernormal powers, to the paths and fruits of liberation, and finally to the highest goal, the attainment of *nibbāna*. ■